

## NOTES ON AN ABORIGINAL GRAVE IN THE DARLING RIVER DISTRICT, N.S.W.

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*(Communicated by R. Etheridge, Junr.)*

(Plate xiii.)

Certain objects of aboriginal manufacture, found over a large area of the Western Division of N.S. Wales, have hitherto been somewhat of a puzzle to science, precise information about them being difficult to obtain. The only published matter on the subject is contained in a paper by Mr. W. R. Harper,\* but to which at the time of writing I have not access.

During two and one-half years' residence on Kallara Station, between Bourke and Wilcannia, on the Darling River, I have collected a number of these objects, which may be divided into two main groups :—

(A) Those of the first type are the most commonly occurring, and are those which Mr. Harper has already described. The material of which they are made is sometimes stone, such as quartzite. In some cases a conveniently shaped pebble has been used, and I have a specimen which makes me think they were sometimes dressed out of a rough oblong block. But perhaps the most frequently occurring specimens have been made of kopi, an earthy gypsum which is first burnt and then mixed to form a cement with sand and water, moulded to the required shape, and afterwards evidently finished by scraping.

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\* Harper (W. R.)—"A Description of certain Objects of unknown Significance, formerly used by some New South Wales Tribes." *Proc. Linn. Soc. N.S. Wales*, 1898, xxiii. p. 420.

In shape and form the specimens of the A type vary much in detail, although the general form is well marked. Generally they are about 12" more or less in length, round in section. The proximal end is from  $1\frac{1}{2}$ " to 2" in diameter, and is hollowed out slightly. This feature is invariable. The distal end terminates in a blunt point. In some cases the body or shaft is of the same diameter about where the narrowing to the point begins; in other cases the body swells to its greatest diameter about the middle of its length. Some are straight, others have a slight bend; some are flattened on one side, and most have certain incised markings on them, generally various combinations of short lines.

(B) The specimens of this type are quite distinct from those of type A. So far as I have seen, they are invariably made of kopi. They are of about the same length as the A specimens, but broader and flattened in section, while in shape they are more or less oval. On one side they are convex and on the other flat, and some are pointed, especially at one end; some have a slight bend, the flat side forming the interior of the bend.

There can be no doubt but that the "stones" of the A type were placed over graves. Although I have never seen them in this position myself, having generally found them lying about or in the vicinity of sandhills, yet several gentlemen who have lived for many years in the district have assured me that they have frequently seen them placed on graves immediately after the interment. Mr. — Hatten, Stock Inspector of Bourke, formerly of Yanda Station, and who has been on the Darling for forty years, tells me that the number varied considerably. Sometimes only two, sometimes seven or eight, would be put on the grave. Mr. — Goddard, of Yandilla, says he has seen as many as twelve or thirteen on a grave, and that they were always placed in a circle, the blunt or proximal ends being stuck in the sand, and the distal ends pointing inwards slightly.

In November, 1900, Mr. Goddard, having discovered a grave with "stones" still *in situ*, I went with him to investigate it. It was situated on Curronyalpa Station, on a sandhill, about three miles back from the river (Darling). The site of the grave was

marked by a large number of "stones" of the B type, arranged in a circle about three feet in diameter. I photographed the grave from two positions before disturbing it (Plate xiii.).

The "stones" were originally, in all probability, at least two deep, *i.e.*, there was an inner circle with an outer in close contact. They were placed on end, with the more pointed ends sloping slightly inwards. On proceeding to dig, we found that there were more "stones" below arranged like those on the surface. It appeared as if a mound had been originally made over the grave, and the "stones" placed or built up around it. On the east side there were in all three tiers, one above the other, the upper ends of the outer overlapping the lower ends of the inner. We found a skeleton about four feet from the surface, and situated to one side (the east side) of the circle above. I am unable to say whether this is accidental or by design.

I have seen a number of aboriginal graves, and in no case have I ever seen the body placed as this one was. The trunk was on its back, with the head turned to one side (the east). The arms were drawn up, one on either side of the head. The legs slanted upwards, so that the feet came within eighteen inches of the surface, and they were crossed about the knees. The body had been evidently enclosed in some vegetable covering, but the material was so decomposed—almost carbonised in places—that it was impossible to make out its original composition with certainty. However, it looked like the bark of some small tree, such as mulga or leopard-wood.

As already noted, the skeleton was placed slightly to one side (the east) of a vertical line from the centre of the circle of "stones" above, and it should be noted that at the arc of the circle towards the east, and corresponding with the position of the head of the skeleton, the "stones" were three deep. Mr. Goddard tells me that in the graves he has seen, the circle of "stones" was always placed over the head of the corpse.

The total number of "stones" on the grave I have described was thirty-nine, and there is considerable difference in size among them. Some seem to have lost much of their original

bulk by the action of weathering. I have preserved the best of them, which will be forwarded to the Australian Museum.

The bones of the skeleton were very decomposed, and most of them crumbled away on being touched. However, I secured a tibia, portions of a humerus, upper and lower jaws and pelvis, which I have handed over to Mr. R. Etheridge, Junr.

There can now be no doubt, as I think, but that both types of the objects under discussion are grave-stones, and the question now arises, "What determined their respective uses?"

The Rev. — Morgan, Presbyterian clergyman at Bourke, told me that he was informed by an old blackfellow that the "stones" of type A were placed only on graves of men, while those of type B were placed on graves of women. If this be so, it would seem that these objects had a phallic significance, which has indeed been surmised in the case of type A.

The skeleton in the grave above described is that of a young person, the epiphyses of the humerus and femur at the proximal ends not being united. The small size of the bones and small development of the roughness and ridges for muscular attachment, as well as the state of the teeth, indicate the same conclusion. Being at sea while writing this, I am unable to say if Mr. Etheridge has been able to determine the sex or not. The fact that none of the front teeth in the upper jaw are missing would point either to the conclusion that the subject was a woman, or too young to have been admitted to the rights of manhood.

Mr. Hatten and Mr. Goddard both emphatically state that they have seen the A stones placed over men's graves, but do not recollect seeing them on women's graves.

I am thus inclined to the tentative conclusion that the peculiar objects under discussion have a phallic significance; that those of the A type were used to mark the graves of men, while those of the B type were placed on graves of women, and perhaps on graves of youths who had not attained their tribal majority.